

## New Strands in Border Research?

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As is always the case with the preparation of a book, time is one of the most important resources. Time is needed to consider the structure of the overall volume, the gathering of the various manuscripts, the editing, the final rounds of fine-tuning, and then the eventual publication. Yet, in the border studies field, where development occurs at such a rapid pace, time appears to be a rather scarce commodity. As noted in the introductory essay to this volume, the field of border studies is a growth industry. In this final chapter, we consider, in greater detail, the developmental processes that are ongoing in the border studies field. Our consideration of these processes rests on the belief that there are certain basic tendencies that we see 'rising to the surface' in border studies. Of course, we recognize that the preceding essays have merely scratched the surface of these emerging tendencies. Still, we believe that this collection of essays provides

a timely overview of empirically grounded theoretical insights on the relevance of borders in contemporary Europe.

As much of the work done by the authors in this volume reveals, borders are not just physical constructs. Borders are frequently regarded as territorial or geographical markers in space, like scratches on the surface of the earth. In many instances though, borders are only visible to the trained eye and approach a type of invisibility to those who are not aware of their presence. State borders that run through water, or borders experienced during European train travel, are prime examples. Borders, whether readily apparent or understood as having a liminal presence, are intrinsically part of a set of social relations wherein the border is made and reproduced. While the *physical* border has been the most common focal point in many state-centric International Relations studies that have dealt with borders, most of the preceding contributions have emphasized the significance of the social meaning of borders and border regions.

### The making of differences

There are, of course, cases where a complex array of high fences, razor sharp barbed wire, roaming spotlights and seemingly intransigent passport control agents are the order of the day in physically *preventing* people from crossing borders. However, particularly in contemporary Europe, these hindrances to the crossing of borders tend to be fewer and fewer. Even without these more extreme obstacles, it is apparent that different categories of cross-border flows occur at different rates. As one example, since the 1960s, the European labor market is open, yet this broad opportunity for cross-border migration has produced relatively low levels of movement. On the other hand, those assets without a human face, such as capital and consumer products, float across borders at an ever more dizzying pace. Thus, it is not the prevention of mobility from state to state that we have to analyze and understand, but rather the apparent immobility, and the factors that contribute to the sense of crossing borders as something that individuals consider undesirable or are not willing to do. As O'Dowd's chapter on developing a lasting peace in Northern Ireland and Buciek's chapter on Gypsies shows, the issue of difference (be it at the group or individual level) is increasingly a central one as scholars look to understand border-related phenomena.

This is particularly the case in geography, one of the 'core' fields of border studies. The scholarly output from geographers on borders and border regions is of greater interest to a wider academic audience and is itself, becoming increasingly inclusive of sociological and cultural debates on issues of difference that are typical features of postmodern scholarship.<sup>1</sup> More broadly though, the multi-disciplinary perspectives that constitutes the field of border studies has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the ongoing debates in social science as to the meaning and societal role of difference, since by definition, borders both express and symbolize difference.

While, in general, we believe that the tensions which develop as scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds bring their respective analytical toolboxes to bear on the question of borders and difference as fruitful, we do also see much more targeted and specific gains from this process. In particular, two realizable contributions of the border studies field to questions of difference can be mentioned here. The focus on the resilience and continued salience of borders has brought along with it an emphasis on many of the constituent elements of difference in modern and postmodern society: nations, ethnicities, languages, place, and relative economic status and legal rights. By shedding light on how these various elements help contribute to the development of difference in border regions and across borders, they open up the possibility for analyzing whether they contribute to the shaping of difference in a host of other empirical settings. Second, while difference is most fashionably crafted as a key focus of the postmodern approach, border studies has offered examples of how difference can also be thought of within more traditional empirical frameworks that focus on the role of institutions. Among other things, this avenue of approach has shown how institutions can harmonize or, more minimally, take away the sharpest edges of differences experienced at borders.<sup>2</sup>

### Borders and social constructivism

Even if the state border is constitutive for most of border studies, much of the contemporary scholarly output on borders rarely offers an exclusive focus on borders themselves, but are increasingly inspired by the study of the make-up of social processes in general, be it in the form of actions, mind sets and perceptions of people living within and across demarcated borders.<sup>3</sup> In some of these instances,

as Simmel has noted, it is the *border effect* on social actions that is being identified, measured and analyzed.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it should be emphasized that this is a reflexive process: Social action establishes borders and borders affect social action. Many of the contemporary accounts on the importance of borders consider borders as either the chief independent variable, or an important contextual variable, in accounting for the phenomena that are under investigation, yet an increasing number of studies utilizing social constructivist insights consider how shifting patterns of societal interaction affect the role, 'visibility' and 'discursive meaning' of the border. This reflexive process is perhaps best captured in Malcolm Anderson's observation that, 'What frontiers represent is constantly reconstituted by human beings who are regulated, influenced and limited by them.'<sup>5</sup>

### Identity and inter-group relations in border areas

Questions of identity and inter-group relations are one of the core concerns of contemporary social science, and border studies is no exception to this trend. In the case of border studies, the focus on identity and group relations is at least partially influenced by the notion that border areas are peripheral regions, and that people living in these regions build identity structures in opposition to political, economic, cultural and administrative centers. Rokkan's general focus on the significance of center-periphery relations, followed by Rumley & Minghi's application of the center-periphery framework to the specific character of border regions are among the better known works in this vein.<sup>6</sup> But the question then remains as to what an analysis of those peripheries, whose edges meet at state boundaries, have to tell us about identity and group relations. Specifically, while we do not question the generally peripheral nature of borders as described in the above manner, we do think that, from an analytic standpoint, borders and border regions are central sites for exploring what constitutes and reinforces group identities, and how those different groups and identities are illuminated by their interactions with the various elements, both official and unofficial, that comprise border regions.

In this regard, we believe that the opportunities for further research are many and fruitful. Here, we find potential joint communities across national borders that are faced with a multitude of problems that derive from differing administrative or legislative condi-

tions. The border *itself* is the site where those differences become visible because of the symbolic character borders have. The responses to these differing legal and administrative conditions vary across a wide spectrum, ranging from European examples, such as a case along the Swedish and Finnish border (see Zalamans, this volume) where concerted efforts are under way to harmonize and erase the most trying obstacles to integration, to the relatively low level of institutionalized cooperation or even informal interest in integration that exists at communities along the U.S.-Canadian border. Understanding what shapes these varying attitudes towards the maintenance of 'official' and 'unofficial' difference in practices and identity should be one of the major concerns of the field in coming years.

Similarly, exploring the internal identity of border regions, and how this identity is produced and reproduced through the internal and external marketing of traditional habits, symbolic commemorations and other cultural devices that emphasize the allegedly unique nature of the border region, is crucial. In this regard, it seems that border studies scholars could benefit greatly by drawing on one of the cornerstones of contemporary political economy, namely, the focus on issues of power. As Hall notes, political economists tend to place a great emphasis on looking at a given set of economic arrangements and speculating as to whose interests are being served from the construction of those arrangements.<sup>7</sup> Yet, this same skeptical cornerstone could be applied to issues of culture. In considering how border region elites (both those in the public and private sphere) seek to activate and perpetuate certain histories, myths and practices, borderlands scholars would have the opportunity to question why, and under what circumstances, a border region's identity is mobilized and promoted by key figures in the region. Examples of this range from those of the tourism industry, which seeks to promote the distinct nature of a regional identity as a tool for emphasizing how special a given region is, and thus, how attractive it may be for travelers who are looking for an 'authentic experience', to local cultural elites that seek special institutional arrangements for regional inhabitants on the basis of some claim regarding the allegedly unique nature of the border region. In these instances, we suggest that the border is not simply a line that shows the outer limits of the state as empire, or a barrier that imbues certain activities with a higher opportunity cost. It is also an opportunity for spe-

cific elites to use in the quest for a more favorable flow of treatment and resources from targeted groups at home and abroad.

Finally, if this section has suggested instances where sharply distinct peripheries *meet* at state borders, we acknowledge that the presence of state borders can disguise those cases where cross-border regions are better thought of as unified transboundary entities, whose commonalities are perhaps unfairly forced to take a back seat to the primacy of the nation-state. If it is by now generally accepted that there is a problematic assumption to consider nation and state as, by default, congruent elements, we suggest the same may be the case for the region and the state. Wichmann Matthiessen's work on how the urban system of Denmark and South Sweden may reconfigure as a result of the Øresund bridge shows how this process is even a potentially dynamic one. What is now a case of two border regions joined by a bridge, may result in a meshed urban region that is faced with the legacy of a state line running through it.<sup>8</sup> Viewing certain border regions as transnational areas where the state border does not necessarily coincide with either the border between nations or the border between social structures of two states opens the view for a substantially clearer image of just what the border symbolizes. More specifically, it opens up the possibility of a more critical view as to the role of the *territorial* border, which is not solely an artifact in space, influencing human behavior along one dimension. Instead, borders can be seen as embedded in different horizons of human rationality, having multiple definitions and symbolic expressions. When this observation is coupled with the possibility of regions with distinct cross-border identities<sup>9</sup>, the question of whether state borders are more or less durable, is seemingly underdeveloped, and requires substantial refinement to take account of the multiple configurations between border and region that have been alluded to here.

### Borders as institutions with multiple and changing meanings

Thus, while territorially demarcated borders certainly have their origins as the settlement of territorial divisions and are also the institutional expression of that settlement, their initial making is only the bottom-most layer of a process that will have multiple additional meanings added as layers over time. From the establishment of a

border as a dividing line, or as a temporary solution to a conflict between territorial units, to a possible future in which the border takes on a gateway function through which fairly regularized interaction takes place, each border develops its own history. This shift from borders as dividing lines (exclusion) to borders as channels for interaction (inclusion of the other side) is, of course, not a simultaneous occurrence in all spheres of society, nor does it manifest itself in all of the varied societal contexts to the same extent. Yet, there appears to be little question, that the way a border shapes a surrounding region, as well as the meaning that elites imbue onto the presence and persistence of a border, are both highly dynamic processes.

However, at the same time as territorial borders are evolving in terms of their meaning, they are also institutions that embody a variety of conflicts, some potential, others more salient. We maintain, first, that borders reveal potential conflicts by their very existence. The geopolitical border, even in the most congenial of circumstances, is the result of intrinsically arbitrary, hard-fought treaties over inches of territory that may have also been the subject of military campaigns. In extreme cases, these conflicts can easily come to the fore again. Yet, even in those more stable situations where only extremist rhetoric would forecast the transformation of stable, if not outwardly friendly, border relations to a situation of overt hostility and violence, borders keep the door open for possible conflict and the need for creative policy-making to minimize the extent of that conflict. One example of the potential conflict brought about by borders is documented in Roll's contribution to this volume, which does not so much depict potential conflict between Estonia and Russia, as it does a set of measures to stave off future conflict between what is expected to be an eventual Russian and European Union border. As much as borders may reveal the propensity for inter-state conflict, they also have the potential to foster border regional-center and even border regional-regional conflict.

### The challenge of focus

Despite the commonly-held assumption that globalization will result in the decreasing significance of borders of all types, this volume has taught us that borders are becoming more, and not less, important. This is not to say that processes of globalization have had no impact on borders. Clearly, this is not the case. Rather, the broad

emphasis on globalization in social sciences has, at the same time, shown that borders do not simply fade away. In an era of globalization, policy-makers and other elites struggle to remove the 'negative' effects of borders, while endeavoring to exploit the varying possibilities they offer. Of course, the problems or possibilities offered by borders and border regions to one set of elites or inhabitants may be sharply different from those experienced by those at another level. Inherent in this, however, is that the increasing policy salience of borders is producing an distinct sense of inter-connectedness among different levels of governance and society.

We see that in the field of border studies, the manner of focusing on borders is shifting. In contrast with a previous devotion to the conceptual understanding of borders as mere physical demarcation, borders are now increasingly seen in terms of social demarcation of groups, individuals, and levels of governance, and also, how these different actors problematize their relationship to the border. The physical space itself is no longer the most important aspect, it is the image, identity and potential of the border that now appears to garner the larger share of scholars' attention.

As this sense of inter-connectedness continues to evolve, so will the interpretation of borders. Some borders are being transformed from an emphasis on closing to that of opening, from gates to bridges, whereas other territorial communities feel threatened by growing interdependency and are showing signs of drawing inward and reinforcing the exclusion aspect of the border. In this sense, it must be understood that the shifting role of borders, and how they are perceived, is intimately linked to specific social, political and economic contexts. By no means do we think that these case-specific factors cannot be theorized on more general levels. Rather, we simply argue that it is essential to recognize their impact as we explore both how borders produce, and are themselves, outcomes.

The primary claim being made throughout this volume, by both argument and example, is that borders have real significance for the social sciences. Yet, we have also emphasized that border studies must draw upon the insights, methods and theories of social science as a whole. To some extent, given that scholars, by default, 'enter' border studies from other disciplines, this process is a given. The aforementioned recent emphasis in border studies on social construction and scale serve as proof that this process continues to evolve. We hope that scholars of border studies will continue to wel-

come these challenges to the scope, definition and practice of border studies, and that they will constructively engage those that appear with new and provocative additions to the border studies toolbox.

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## Notes

1. This trend should not be considered absolute. A particularly dramatic account of the resistance found among geographers to the postmodern project can be found in Michael Dear, 2001: The Politics of Geography: Hate Mail, Rabid Referees and Culture Wars. *Political Geography*. Vol. 20, pp. 1-12.
2. For an example, see Köhl, this volume.
3. Treatments of borders that do not have this emphasis on social process include, among others, the international law literature. For an example of this in the European context, see Cullen, P., 1998: Frontier Issues before the European

- Court of Justice. In: Anderson, M. & E. Bort (Eds.), 1998: *The Frontiers of Europe*. London: Pinter, pp. 187-204.
4. Simmel, G., 1968 [1908]: *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftungen*. 5th edition, Vol. 2. Berlin: Duncker/Humblot. A contemporary example of this approach can be found in Walter Leimgruber, 1999: Border Effects and the Cultural Landscape: The Changing Impact of Boundaries on Regional Development in Switzerland. In: Hans Knippenberg and Jan Markusse (eds.) *Nationalising and Denationalising European Border Regions, 1800-2000*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 199-222.
  5. Anderson, M., 1996: *Frontiers. Territory and State Formation in the Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity Press / Blackwell, p. 3.
  6. Rokkan, S. & D.W. Urwin, 1983: *Economy, Territory, Identity. Politics of West European Peripheries*. London: Sage; Rumley, D. & J.V. Minghi, 1991: Introduction: the border landscape concept. In: Rumley, D. & J.V. Minghi (Eds.): *The Geography of Border Landscapes*. London: Routledge, 1-14
  7. Peter Hall, 1997: The Role of Interests, Institutions and Ideas in the Comparative Political Economy of the Industrialized Nations. In: Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (Eds.) *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture and Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 174-207.
  8. Christian Wichmann Matthiessen, 2000: Bridging the Öresund: Potential Regional Dynamics, Integration of Copenhagen (Denmark) and Malmö-Lund (Sweden). A Cross-Border Project on the European Metropolitan Level. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 8, pp. 171-180.
  9. See Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border*. New York: Wiley, pp. 35-38 for a discussion of the concept of an 'identity of the region'.